FORMS OF DEATH: NECROPOLITICS, MOURNING, AND BLACK DIGNITY

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To be Black means to have ancestors whose humanity has been denied by slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and segregation, as well as by many theories elaborated in order to justify and intensify these modes of domination. To be Black also means having to face the enduring legacies of these systems and theories, which predominantly manifest through overexposure to violence and death. Today, premature death and habituation to loss remain constitutive features of Black experience. Dignity, often defined as the inherent value of every single human being, has been a core concept in ethics since Kant, at least. But in both philosophy and modern politics, the claim of respect for the dignity of people has coexisted with deep antiblackness. However, apart from the Western understanding of dignity stands another tradition. The concept of dignity is pervasive in Black radicalism, Caribbean philosophy, and African thought since the 18th century. This article draws inspiration from the legacy of these thinkers to elaborate an ethics centred on the specificities of racialized life.

Être noir, c'est avoir des ancêtres dont l'humanité a été niée par l'esclavage, le colonialisme, le néocolonialisme, la ségrégation ainsi que les nombreuses théories élaborées pour justifier et intensifier ces modes de domination. Être noir revient aussi à faire face à l'héritage de ces systèmes et de ces théories qui se manifestent avant tout dans une surexposition à la violence et à la mort. Aujourd'hui, la mort prématurée et l'habituation à la perte demeurent des traits constitutifs de l'existence noire. La dignité, souvent définie comme la valeur intrinsèque de chaque être humain, est un concept fondamental de l'éthique au moins depuis Kant. Mais, dans la philosophie comme dans la politique modernes, la revendication du respect de la dignité a coexisté avec une profonde négrophobie. Toutefois, en dehors de cette interprétation occidentale de la dignité existe une autre tradition. En effet, le concept de dignité est omniprésent au sein du radicalisme noir, de la philosophie antillaise et de la pensée africaine depuis le XVIII^e^ siècle. Cet article s'inspire de ces héritages pour élaborer une éthique centrée sur la spécificité de la vie exposée à la violence raciale.

In her 1992 open letter to social sciences and humanities scholars entitled "No Humans Involved," Sylvia Wynter explores the theoretical and speculative consequences of the use of the acronym NHI by Los Angeles officials to designate cases involving Black men: "[Y]oung Black males can be *perceived*, and therefore *behaved towards*, only as the *Lack* of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American."[1] Wynter's letter initiated a necessary conversation about the actuality of a specific experience of antiblackness that conflates with the possibility of being executed. Critical Race Theory, which tends to present a more empirically-oriented account of race, confirms that overexposure to state violence and premature death are central features of Black existence.[2] The pervasiveness of those experiences of racism in the United States and throughout the world is the reason why Ruth Gilmore famously defined racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[3] Insisting on the too-often overlooked gendered dimension of such state violence, philosopher Tommy J. Curry underlined that around 300 Black men are victims of police killings each year. Further emphasizing their overrepresentation in the prison population and their unequal treatment in terms of healthcare, Curry concludes that "American society not only is generally dangerous for Black men but also uses fatal force to limit the number of Black men in the population and control their political dissent. Police killings specifically target Black males under the language of social welfare to limit the political will this group can exert within the democratic system."[4]

Philosopher Leonard Harris describes such a theoretical orientation as an *actuarial account of racism*. His approach is critical of unexamined assumptions according to which a representational or genealogical study of racism may provide us with apt tools to fight the enduring threats of racism and white supremacy efficiently. In Harris's view, those approaches tend to overlook the most present and material manifestations of racism—especially, as Curry showed, when its victims are racialized men and boys (TMN, 230). Rather than trying to

[1] Sylvia Wynter, *No Humans Involved. An Open Letter to My Colleagues* (Hudson: Publication Studio Hudson, 2015), 4.
[2] Tommy J. Curry, "Will the Real CRT Please Stand Up? The Dangers of Philosophical Contributions to CRT," *The Crit*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2009): 1–47.
[3] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
[4] Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not. Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 133. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TMN.

explain the logics or historical origins of racism, actuarial method consists in using statistical tools to determine demographic differences of health and mortality, objectivizing race as a profound degradation of racialized people's whole existence. The aim is to describe and depict racism instead of trying to explain it. Harris writes, "I argue that an actuarial account could allow us to depict racism as a life-and-death exchange; victims as corpses, cumulatively persons being robbed of their body parts and hosts for parasites of the same species."[5]

Wynter's investigation, Gilmore's redefinition of racism, as well as Harris's actuarial perspective, are all signs of what we may call, resorting to a concept coined by Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe,[6] a necropolitical moment within Black studies and Africana thought. In other words, rather than focussing on discrimination and exclusion in terms of access, more and more scholars tend to see life-and-death situations as definitional features of racialized—and particularly Black—experience and social condition. Throughout this article, I am interested in both the necessity of the necropolitical paradigm and the need to clarify its definition. Because of its focus on the ubiquity of Black dying, actuarial perspective forces us to reconsider traditional ethical conceptions of life and death radically, from an Africana philosophical perspective. But precisely because of this reconsideration, the very notions of life and death we generally use may now appear as too naïve or overly simplistic. Contemporary focus on Black death and dying is a necessary and extremely valuable contribution to contemporary critical thinking about race, racism, and dehumanization at large. But the endeavor will remain incomplete as long as we do not make explicit that life should not only be addressed in quantitative terms. Said otherwise, depopulation facing Black communities has deeper implications than the sole statistical decrease in anonymous "Black bodies." First, because, as Lewis R. Gordon remarked, the "Black bodies" synecdoche "refers to treating black people as mere surfaces, superficial physical beings without consciousness and thus a point of view."[7] Second, because there is every reason to believe communities threatened by a slow termination of their members end up secreting very unique notions of what life and death mean.

According to the United States Census Bureau, there are only 88 Black male adults for every 100 Black women in the country, in

[5] Leonard Harris, "Necro-Being: An Actuarial Account of Racism," *Res Philosophica*, vol. 95, no. 2 (2018): 273–302, here 282.
[6] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.
[7] Lewis R. Gordon, *Fear of Black Consciousness* (London: Allen Lane, 2022), 31.

contrast to 97 white men for every 100 white women.[8] In some neighbourhoods, the gender imbalance reaches a critical level. The aim of this article is to draw the consequences of such quantitative data for a qualitative investigation of Black life. Some towns and neighbourhoods are haunted by the absence of Black males, due to premature death and mass incarceration. The ethical question the situation raises is the following: how do the pervasiveness of death and disappearing of racialized people impact the very concept of life we make use of? The pervasiveness of racial violence must have an influence on the way everyday life is conceptualized and experienced. If Blackness, and specifically Black maleness, generates a non-traditional relationship between life and death, characterized by the constant exposure to violence, the concept of *dignity* we generally use to designate the inherent value of every single human life cannot stay unscathed. In his 1983 book *Black Marxism*, political theorist Cedric Robinson affirmed the existence of a specific Black radical tradition, rooted in African cosmogonies and revealed by the confrontation to the violent conditions created by chattel slavery and the conquest of sub-Saharan Africa.[9] In the field of ethics, the concept of dignity reveals the same kind of discrepancies and differences that Robinson underlined in the field of revolutionary political thought: a historical particularity of the Black experience that translates into particular traditions of thought. If traditional Western ethical traditions are not well equipped to face the questions raised by Blackness and the history of colonialism at large, I will affirm the relevance of a Black, African and Afro-diasporic concept of dignity.

Following Harris's actuarial statistical logic, racialized experience ends up being understood in terms of risk. Therefore, the risk to be killed, imprisoned, or unjustly denied proper care or assistance become fundamental elements of our interpretations of Blackness. The notion of risk implies a normal situation, a standard that may be endangered by carelessness or intrepidity. But Black overexposure to death and dying urges us to rethink normality itself: it has a tremendous impact on how life is qualitatively experienced on a daily basis. My argument is that death is profoundly formative for people from African descent in the West and beyond. I use the phrase "forms of death" to underline a constant state of peril, but also the repeated experience of witnessing the death of loved ones, the inner conviction of

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[8] Mike Maciag, "Where Have All the Black Men Gone?" *Governing.com* (Jan. 22, 2019), [https://www.governing.com/topics/public-justice-safety/gov-black-men-gender-imbalance-population.html], accessed Oct. 15, 2022.

[9] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

being part of a casted-out people—all concurring to build a qualitatively distinct quotidian.

According to Curry, "Black male scholars who dare to speak about and study Black men and boys as theory-producing subjects, beyond their dead corpses, are despised by the academy…. To choose to write on Black males is to accept that you and they are in conversation with death" (TMN, 141). If theory often fails to see Blackness beyond a stack of dark cadavers, our participation to this conversation requires us to densify our understanding of Black male death in order not to reinforce Black male disposability. This article aims at showing how influential philosophical accounts of the contemporary politics of death (such as Judith Butler's notion of grievability) tends to comprehend death as something that occurs—as an event. We should instead theorize it as a continuum: as something that shapes the reality of the entire diaspora. I claim that, paradoxically, this undecidability between life and death has historically defined Black dignity.

1. Recasting Necropolitics

When it comes to the question of socially or politically caused violent death, contemporary theory often resorts to Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics." But in order to define it as precisely as possible, we must distinguish it from neighbouring notions of "biopolitics" and "thanatopolitics," with which it is too often confused. Mbembe builds upon Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. In Foucault, and more specifically in his 1976 lecture at the Collège de France "*Society must be defended*," biopolitics unequivocally relates to race: "What in fact is racism? It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die."[10] According to Foucault, race has two features. Firstly, it creates a divide amongst the living and, secondly, it adds an antagonistic and predatory dimension to the divide. What a society thinks to be its enemy becomes a biological threat that must be eradicated in order to preserve the worthy, virtuous, and healthy side of the biopolitical frontier. Social community tends to embody healthiness, so its racialized adversaries are redefined as toxins or illnesses. The French philosopher likely has in mind contemporary forms of racial

[10] Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*, (ed.) M. Bertani and A. Fontana, (tr.) D. Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 254.

purification that culminated in National Socialist antisemitism.[11] Conceptualizing such a clear cut opposition between a worthy population and a nuisance one, Foucault opens the door to contemporary Italian philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito who, for their part, have proposed to name the aforementioned racist and exterminatory tendencies of biopolitics "thanatopolitics."[12] The concept allows one to clearly distinguish the type of violence that occurs between people of equal dignity, from a violence directed at people marked with the seal of indignity.

The interest in the concept of necropolitics comes from its propensity to trouble the seemingly obvious opposition between life as *Bios* and death as *Thanatos*. French Hellenist and philosopher Jean Fallot differentiated two concepts of death that date back to ancient Greece: *Thanatos* on the one hand, and *Necros* on the other.[13] As Epicurean philosophy taught us, *Thanatos* amounts to nothingness: death is what is not. Death amounts to an utter absence of sensation, absolute interruption of being in the world. On the contrary, *Necros* translates the word "corpse"—but this is not its sole meaning. It also designates the weird interstice between life and death in which tragic heroes, gladiators, and those buried alive were trapped. Comparing those two ways of qualifying death, the concept of thanatopolitics adequately relates to a docile, dignified, and in the end reassuring conception of death, whereas necropolitics deals with way more complicated situations. Racial violence does not always respond to rational and instrumental motives, but rather produces extreme violence, sometimes making our traditional moral geometry collapse.

Jean Fallot's exploration of the original Greek meaning of those words enlightens our understanding of contemporary Black life. *Necros*—defined as the non-life of tragic heroes, gladiators, and those buried alive—resonates with Harris's words: "Racism is a form of necro-being: it kills and prevents persons from being born. It is absolute necro-tragedy. There is no redemption for the worst of its victims."[14] Racialized people are exposed to tragedy inasmuch as, analogously to ancient protagonists, their attempts to resist the subjugation they suffer from may pave the way to even more terrible miseries.

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[11] André Pichot, *Pure Society: From Darwin to Hitler*, (tr.) D. Fernbach (London: Verso Books, 2000).

[12] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 122; Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 110–45.

[13] Jean Fallot, *Cette Mort qui n'en est pas une* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1993).

[14] Harris, "Necro-Being," 273.

Ancient historian Jean-Pierre Vernant has described tragedy as a situation in which the hero is doomed to remain ignorant of the destructive and implacable forces that maneuver his or her destiny. "So long as there has been no complete consummation, human affairs remain enigmas that are the more obscure the more the actors believe themselves sure of what they are doing and what they are."[15] In Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, the title-character thinks of himself as a benevolent king and orients his will accordingly in an attempt to circumvent an abominable fate. But he has wasted his breath: "[A]t the moment when he realizes that he is responsible for having forged his misfortune with his own hands, he accuses the deity of having plotted and contrived everything in advance, of having delighted in tricking him from start to finish of the drama, the better to destroy him."[16] The tragic hero is thrown into an indifferent world—experienced as metaphysical plight and ontological injustice—that leaves individual good will, sincerity, and spontaneity all powerless under the eyes of an unfeeling deity. There is an undeniable similarity here to the violence that criminalized Black males experience, being riveted inside the state spiral of white supremacy. Police brutality survivor Rodney King's defensive gestures while he was bludgeoned have been interpreted in court as the very proof of his dangerous, predatory nature as a Black male, justifying his lynching.[17] Black men are going through a tragedy.

In addition, contemporary Black male life strangely echoes that of ancient enslaved gladiators who were meant to provide the Roman people with entertainment. Sublimed athletic violence, public physical prowess, and pain-bearing endurance are ingredients of contemporary Black male life. Professional American-style football players suffer from high mortality rates and are substantially more inclined to develop cardiovascular and neurodegenerative diseases, among other afflictions.[18] Thinking of how overexposure to premature death structures Black life in America, it is hard not to recall 70% of National Football League players are Black.[19] The athletes' fame, money, and

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[15] Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 45.
[16] *Ibid*.
[17] Elsa Dorlin, *Se Défendre. Une philosophie de la violence* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017), 13.
[18] VT Nguyen, RD Zafonte, JT Chen, *et al*., "Mortality Among Professional American-Style Football Players and Professional American Baseball Players." *JAMA Network Open*, vol. 2, no. 5 (2019): 1–13.
[19] Nikhil Sonnad, "The NFL's Racial Divide, in One Chart," *Quartz* (May 24, 2018), [https://qz.com/1287915/the-nfls-racial-makeup-explains-much-of-its-national-anthem-problems/], accessed Oct. 15, 2022.

renown are at the cost of their health and of their very physical integrity. Crushed by years of an intense overexploitation widely presented as harmless amusement, those bodies usually reach retirement in an advanced state of decrepitude and brokenness. Praised for their muscular excellence, admired for their unparalleled power, the statures of these athletes after a few years collapse into reprieved corpses. Mass culture consumes Black men as gladiators.

Finally, in the age of mass incarceration, partnered with the growing number of life sentences, Black imprisonment in America has become similar to an industrial burial of a large number of people of colour. Contemporary policing and prison systems take those people out of circulation *en masse*, functioning as "a coercive force constraining and reorganizing the very being of the Black men within [prison] walls"(TMN, 86). Different place, but similar ways: throughout Southern Europe, unsanitary administrative retention centres have been designed to shelter and detain migrants from Africa and the Middle East, waiting for Western governments to rule over their fate. None of these modern-day concentration camps are close to fitting human rights standards, leaving unaccompanied minor migrants by themselves in deplorable hygiene conditions.[20] In both North America and Europe, incarceration approximates live burial insofar as these modern forms of imprisonment turn time itself into a torture instrument. Time in these graves is impoverished to the extreme, deprived of everything that constitutes the foundation of a worthy human life. It leaves prisoners without any perspective, apart from the heavy presence of death and the unlikely haunting of a hollow hope. Black men are buried alive deep in the paupers' graves of mass incarceration.

In summary, Black men are exposed to tragedy. Black sportsmen's lives amount to a gladiatorial fight for survival till death. Mass incarceration buries Black male bodies alive without any formality, sepulchre, or stele. If the notion of *Necros* is rigorously understood, those phenomena that complicate the boundary between life and death are meant to be subsumed under a renewed category of the necropolitical. In a passage from his 2010 book *Sortir de la Grande Nuit*, not included in its English translation, Mbembe writes that "what stands beyond death deserves to be thought of in itself, as a prerequisite for any habitation in the historical world,"[21] destabilizing the supposedly clear frontier that separates life from death. This theoretical refinement has had consequences on the way he theorizes racial necropolitics: "To a

[20] Babels, *De Lesbos à Calais : Comment l'Europe fabrique des camps* (Neuvy-en-Champagne: Le Passager Clandestin, 2017).
[21] Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la Grande Nuit* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 35; my translation.

large extent, racism is the driver of the necropolitical principle insofar as it stands for organized destruction, for a sacrificial economy, the functioning of which requires, on the one hand, a generalized cheapening of the price of life and, on the other, a habituation to loss."[22] In other words, Black vulnerability is inseparable from the existential dimension of the relationship one maintains with the constancy of others' (early) mortality. Black death is not an event, but a continuum that intimately *informs* Black existence.[23] The notion of habituation to loss summons up the theme of mourning, that is to say, the question of the dialogue that the most disposable people have with death. It reminds us that in contexts of racial violence, the loved one's dying is not an unexpected blow of misfortune, but rather a recurring warning shot.

2. Beyond a Black death, white mourning paradigm

Partly in dialogue with Mbembe's notion of necropolitics, Judith Butler made use of the psychoanalytical concept of mourning as a tool to ground socially and historically the notion of finitude to explain our perception of premature death. Traditionally, this last notion is associated with existential philosophy and designates the unescapable condition of human mortality. In Heidegger, finitude provides the existential being—the *Dasein*—with its own singularity, given that one's death is supposed to individualize it.[24] From an existentialist point of view, death is the most singular event, the only experience one cannot share with someone else. But the perspective according to which death is essentially a singular property of human existence ignores the uneven conditions at the core of necropolitical views on racism. Taking into account the vast array of forms of exposure to socially-caused decease, Butler acknowledges that some social classes and demographics are more exposed to violent and premature death than others. What Butler labels as "precariousness" is a socialization and a politicization of the notion of finitude.[25] She insists on its circumstantial dimension and irrefragable exteriority. In situations of exclusion, segregation, war, or colonialism, to be reaped by the sickle of death can be conceived neither as an interior factor nor as an existential

[22] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 32; Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016), 56.
[23] Norman Ajari, *Noirceur : Race, genre, classe et pessimisme dans la pensée africaine-américaine au XXIe siècle* (Paris: Divergences, 2022).
[24] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010).
[25] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

opportunity to conquer one's authentically individual self. Quite the opposite: it is an exterior factor, since "precariousness underscores our radical substitutability and anonymity in relation both to certain socially facilitated modes of dying and death and to other socially conditioned modes of persisting and flourishing."[26]

But the main originality of Butler's discussion of finitude lies in her strategic use of a psychoanalytic notion of mourning. According to her, to be authentically human, or to be part of a legitimate community, amounts to being a potential object of grief: "[W]e come to feel only in relation to a perceivable loss, one that depends on social structures of perception; and we can only feel and claim affect as our own on the condition that we have already been inscribed in a circuit of social affect" (FOW, 50). Butler insists on the fact that all deaths do not produce the same feeling of pain and sadness. For instance, in the American context, victims of terrorist attacks are considered to be highly grievable – but at the same time, public mourning can be used to legitimize the killings of populations that cannot pretend to be legitimate objects to mourn, Butler says.

In the context of our discussion on dignity and necropolitics, the main issue raised by Butler's framework comes from her interpretation of the relation between mourning and racism that her notion of differentiated mourning implies:

> Forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable. The differential distribution of grievability across populations has implications for why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference. (FOW, 24)

The most striking aspect of her analysis is the level of abstraction of the notion of grievability, as if the most important aspect of the racialized populations' death was how it appears under the eyes of racists. Of course, it is highly plausible that racist indifference toward racialized people's death and suffering is a key feature of any racist endeavor—it eases killing, rape, and torture. But a closer attention to the history of race and mourning forces us to escape from the sole alternative between grievability and ungrievability. As the philosopher Hourya Bentouhami argues, Butler posits the default of grievability as a modality of a default of recognition. According to her, colonial

[26] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 22. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FOW.

Western nations are internally constituted by the vulnerability of racialized peoples whose loss they refuse to acknowledge and recognize.[27] But another hypothesis deserves to be considered: what if the mourning of the colonized populations was not simply neglected, but rather desired, encouraged, and shaped by the white racial order?

As will be exemplified in the next section, colonized populations' mourning process was quite often weaponized against them, in order to demolish them morally and psychically. A necropolitical account of Black dignity could allow us to acknowledge the difference between a theory in which racist and colonial violence are defined as side effects of white and Western self-absorbed neglect on the one hand, and a conscious, strategically engineered attack on those peoples' psyches on the other. The practical consequence of the first perspective would be that we should encourage a reform of white polities in order to allow them to recognize and value racialized peoples as neighbours. The second approach leads us in a different direction. Recognition of racialized peoples amounts to a deeper intimate knowledge of their conscious and unconscious beings and actually increases their vulnerability to the strategies of racist psychic attrition and exhaustion that constitute white politics of mourning. By no means should recognition be defined as a safeguard against such violence—quite the opposite, as pointed out by Tommy Curry: "Within racist regimes anti-Black racism creates conditions of disposability where the members of a specific racial group are conditioned for death."[28]

It has already been pointed out that Butler's account on grief remains heavily dependent on Freud's interpretation of melancholia.[29] Her Freudian approach rests on her unwillingness to question the most precarious beings' actual existence and dignity, due to a too close focus on white Western mourning. The possibility of significantly and essentially distinct forms of mourning is never envisioned since the relevance of a generic psychoanalytical concept of mourning is always assumed.[30] As a consequence, the effect of the pervasiveness of violent death on colonized lives is theorized as a mere photographic

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[27] Hourya Bentouhami, *Judith Butler : Race, genre et mélancolie* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2022).

[28] Tommy J. Curry, "Conditioned for Death: Analyzing Black Mortalities from Covid-19 and Police Killings in the United States as a Syndemic Interaction," *Comparative American Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3–4 (2021): 257–70, here 262.

[29] David W. McIvor, "Bringing Ourselves to Grief: Judith Butler and the Politics of Mourning," *Political Theory*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2012): 409–36.

[30] Livio Boni, "Guerre, deuil hyperbolique, nécro-logie. Derrida avec Butler?" in *Sexualités, genres et mélancolie. S'entretenir avec Judith Butler*, (ed.) M. David-Ménard (Paris: Éditions Campagne Première, 2009).

negative of white experience and expectations. In this regard, Butlerian interpretation is doomed to fail to acknowledge the warfare white supremacy has conducted against racialized people's very capacity for grief. This limitation is another example of the preeminence of *Thanatos* and of the enduring ignorance of the experience of *Necros*. If we take the thickness of death presupposed by the concept of *Necros* seriously, the most pressing theoretical question has nothing to do with the uneven distribution of grievability. It relates to the plurality of forms of grieving themselves. People surrounded with "dead Black male bodies, Black men and boys, in the streets. Dead Niggers made into YouTube sensations" (TMN, 1) may not share the same notion of grief, the same affects and the same relation to death as the one Butler presupposes. What matters is the texture of mourning, the grain of death; it goes beyond closed alternatives between life and death or between grief and its rejection.

Our theoretical interpretations of political killings are often caught in a restricted European tradition. Attempts to apply this archive to the experience of racialized people, ignoring how colonial and racial dimensions shift the perspective, amounts to forcing their specific history into a Procrustean bed. Let us think of public executions of white subjects or citizens, such as the killing of Robert-François Damiens that Michel Foucault famously describes in the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*. In Western European political contexts, those events had at least two key functions. First, "the tortured body spectacularly demonstrates…the authority, validity, and legitimacy of the sovereign's laws, as well as the force of those laws."[31] But, secondly, it does so by excluding the wrongdoer from the community. The sentence proves the convict's absence from public life. Even if modernity is characterized by a lesser tolerance to public displays of state violence and has apparently buried torture down in the shadows of dusty cells, the underlying philosophy remains the same. Tortured, incarcerated, or judged, the criminalized European body is outcasted, alienated, exhibited as foreign to society. To use Butler's language, those bodies are displayed and theorized as not grievable. On the contrary, in regard to the history of racial violence, the challenge consists in understanding how brutal executions have been conceived throughout the history of colonial violence as a way of generating negative communities that *included* the afflicted or killed subject instead of excluding it. As we will see in what follows, public killings of colonized people have been a way of inscribing those populations in raced-based hierarchical societies as victims *par excellence*. Black and indigenous deviants are not

[31] J. M. Bernstein, *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), 28.

perceived as unfortunate exceptions, the proliferation of which must be prevented. Each individual represents the race as a whole. Butler's politics of mourning cannot describe how, in those contexts, death inscribes both corpses and survivors in a society that is engineered and designed to be unbearably soaked with grief. Necropolitics of mourning generates negative communities by way of weaponizing non-white sorrow. Black life is saturated with the perpetuation of demise and cries out to be theorized in a completely renewed fashion, taking into account the inhabited interstice between the living and the dead.

3. The (Anti)Colonial Politics of Mourning

In June 1960, proclaiming the country's independence, the first president of Congo (now known as République Démocratique du Congo), Patrice Lumumba, declared, "We have known the atrocious sufferings, of those banished to remote regions because of their political opinions and religious beliefs; exiles in their own country, their fate was truly worse than death."[32] Lumumba summarizes here one of the possible definitions of necropolitics: what generates worse-than-death, unbearable conditions, *i.e.*, indignity. In other words, racial violence produces unceasing shifts of the frontier between life and death. Let me mention some examples. In the 1830s, during the French colonial conquest of Algeria, lieutenant colonel Lucien-François de Montagnac elaborated a new kind of military tactics. Having read that Muslims decapitated by Christian combatants are supposedly condemned to be barred from heaven, he requested from his soldiers to systematically cut the heads off the Arabs, dooming them to hell. In the same vein, Algerian graveyards were often desecrated during the conquest. Soil and human remains were used as embankment for new roads, and gravestones as building material for constructions such as windmills. It even occurred that the corpses were turned into animal charcoal.[33] The demolition of gravestones makes the indigenous deaths unspeakable, and the dissolution of their bodies into the roads or coals interrupts any work of mourning. The conscious aim of the colonizing forces was to annihilate any reference to the common past—to shatter any symbolic permanence.

Such a fierceness in killing the already dead may at first appear as a thing from the past, an archaic residue of superstitious worldviews.

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[32] Patrice Lumumba, *Lumumba Speaks: The Speeches and Writings of Patrice Lumumba 1958–1961* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1972), 221.

[33] Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Coloniser, Exterminer. Sur la guerre et l'État colonial* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), 169.

But let us recall circumstances that followed the assassination of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. The body was left laying on the ground for four and a half hours, in the sun, while law enforcement prevented at gunpoint the victim's relatives from getting closer. When the corpse was finally removed, some neighbours improvised a memorial there, bringing flowers, pictures, and teddy bears. An agent of the Police Dog Services let his animal urinate on the wreaths. Shortly after, police cars drove over the memorial, smashing it.[34] A similar negrophobic drive lead to repeated destruction of a memorial honouring the young victim of lynching Emmett Till in Glendora, Mississippi.[35] Anti-Black racism ignites a disproportionate violence, which perpetuates even after death, preventing the dead from rest, and the living from mourning. As slaves and colonized people before them, today's Blacks are living in a world saturated with spectres who cannot find peace, since they were denied a proper death.

If young Black males are killed in the streets of the United States, South Africa, France, Brazil, United Kingdom, and so on, that is because their lives have been largely theorized as just as worthless and barren as corpses in the first place. The interpretation of the term "necropolitics," as I elaborate it here, aims at challenging traditional European ontology based on the law of non-contradiction, which implies radical reciprocal exclusivity of life and death. But pre-modern and non-modern philosophies, as well as modern African and Afro-diasporic ontologies, share other perspectives on the matter. Significantly, in an early essay, Aimé Césaire defines Blackness as "a death more dreadful than death itself, where the living ones are adrift."[36] In other words, Blackness is a "form-of-death" rather than an ethical "form-of-life."[37] In the same vein, Cameroonian theologian and philosopher Fabien Eboussi Boulaga wrote about Central African ontologies: "[T]he gap between life and death is so small, and decreases so quickly, that the passage from one another is commonly done. The dead are among the living, who will be dead soon."[38] African and Afro-

[34] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (New York: Haymarket Books, 2016), 153–54.
[35] Aimee Oritz, "Emmett Till Memorial Has a New Sign. This Time, It's Bulletproof," *New York Times* (Oct. 20, 2019), [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/20/us/emmett-til-bulletproof-sign.html], accessed Oct. 15, 2022.
[36] Aimé Césaire, *Écrits politiques. 1935–1956* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2016), 36; my translation.
[37] Norman Ajari, *La Dignité ou la mort. Éthique et politique de la race* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019), 92–93.
[38] Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianisme sans fétiche* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981), 106; my translation.

diasporic authors constantly theorized their own situation as a contamination of life with death and reciprocally reinvested the traditional African idea of ancestrality. That is to say, the continuing presence of the dead among the living through memory, narration, and everyday practices. Paradoxically, African intellectual heritage subsisted to explain its own wrecking and the systematic dehumanization of Black existence. The African ontological idea of a subsistence of the dead among the living seems to haunt contemporary Africana philosophy, just as it haunted anticolonial resistance.

Throughout the history of African colonized, exploited, and dehumanized peoples, the pervasiveness of death and the enduring experience of mourning have never been an absolute obstacle to anticolonial struggle. In 19th century Belgian Congo, under the reign of the infamous king Léopold II, Congolese forced-labourers used to sing, "We are tired of living under this tyranny. We can no longer stand to see our women and children taken away from us, to be used by white savages. We will make war. We know we will die, but we want to die. We want to die."[39] Death is not an obstacle to the affirmation of intrepid political wrath. Quite the opposite: self-conscious relation to death and dying amounts to a sense of African dignity, inscribed in Black finitude itself. In the context of the mid-20th century Algerian War, Frantz Fanon describes both the social and meta-psychological consequences of massive killings perpetrated by white colonizers and French soldiery:

> These collective deaths, without warning, without a previous illness that had been treated and fought, abandoned in the ditch on the edge of the road, cannot set into motion emotional mechanisms that are homogeneous to a society. Lamentations and grief-stricken faces are part of a patterned, stable world. One does not weep, one does not do as before when one is faced with multiple murders.[40]

Fanon shows how colonial attempts to obstruct or ruin traditional processes of mourning may also generate affective responses apt to endanger colonial power itself. Far from causing the expected psychic collapse, the determination of the anticolonial activists increased

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[39] Elikia M'Bokolo, "Afrique centrale : Le temps des massacres," *Le Livre noir du colonialisme. XVIe–XXIe siècles: De l'extermination à la repentance*, (ed.) M. Ferro (Paris: Robert Lafont, 2004), 590; my translation.

[40] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, (tr.) H. Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 117–18.

exponentially with each cadaver. It generated a both wild and radical politicization of the phenomenon of dying itself:

> The war has dislocated Algerian society to such a point that any death is conceived of as a direct or indirect consequence of colonialist repression. Today there is not a dead person in Algeria who is not the victim of French colonialism. It is impossible for an Algerian civilian to remain untouched by the war of colonial reconquest. More than this, there is not a death of an Algerian outside of Algeria which is not attributed to French colonialism. The Algerian people have thus decided that, until independence, French colonialism will be innocent of none of the wounds inflicted upon its body and its consciousness.[41]

Following Fanon's clinical analysis, the pervasiveness of death in contexts of racial subjugation makes it impossible for the subject to identify himself or herself as a living being, since death itself loses its meaning. Fanon describes a true fusion between life and death which prevents the dead from dying, that is to say, from symbolically appearing in public space *as dead*. The sordid fact that, in colonies, France sometimes required families to pay taxes for long-dead relatives was not only about money.[42] It was part of the continued refusal of a white supremacist apparatus to consider the racialized dead as dead, and the racialized living beings as living. The in-between, to which the dead are condemned, also signifies the living's entrapment into this transitional space where differential identification with death has been sabotaged. But Fanon shows that such a situation is twofold rather than unilaterally pathological. The form of mourning Fanon describes is not an incapacitating melancholia but a politicized way of existing among the dead, designating enemies and connecting the colonized with their own sense of self-worth. The deceased do not appear as oppressing ghosts, but as companions, whose look provide colonized people with dignity.

4. Black dignity

Steve Biko interpreted Black death and dehumanization as the dark, violent underside of white ordinary life.[43] What consequences does it

[41] *Ibid*., 118.
[42] Henri Cartier, *Comment la France « civilise » ses colonies* (Paris: Les Nuits Rouges, 2006), 67.
[43] Steve Biko, *I Write What I like. Selected Writings* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 88.

have on our understanding of dignity, which supposedly designates the intrinsic worth of every single human being, *i.e.*, the innate value of ordinary lives? Africana philosophy's understanding of dignity does not only differ from a European perspective, but also contains a radical criticism of traditional white moral philosophy as a legitimation of Black denigration and dehumanization. Historically, Black dignity is not merely dissimilar to its white counterpart; they are antagonistic notions. According to Black theologian James Cone, "White people achieved what they called dignity by their enslavement of black Africans; they measured their importance by the number of Africans they enslaved."[44] In other words, white dignity almost always made room for Black indignity. Generous definitions of dignity as the intrinsic value of any single human being are misleading. European philosophical and legal definitions of dignity repeatedly made exceptions when it came to Africans and other non-white people.

The most influential philosopher on dignity is without a doubt Immanuel Kant, who famously appealed "to treat man, who is now more than a machine, in accord with his dignity." His thought notoriously influenced the Charter of the United Nations and many countries' Constitutions. It is well known that, according to Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*,[45] dignity reveals itself through moral law. Such a law has nothing to do with judiciary laws, which are revisable and relate to jurisprudence. It is rather conceptualized as akin to laws of nature. In other words, according to Kant, the immorality of lying or theft are predicated upon immutable laws. An act is not bad because it contradicts one's mores or causes pain; it is bad because it violates the law of non-contradiction. For instance, a thief who steals an object contradicts the very concept of possession, since one cannot deny to another reasonable being the right to possess something while simultaneously affirming his own right to possess it. In Kant, the concept of the immoral boils down to a notion of self-contradiction that only a truly rational being is able to grasp. As a consequence, to recognize one's dignity amounts to recognizing his quality as a reasonable being and carrier of the moral law, that is to say, in Kantian terms, his quality of *person*.

At first sight, such a theory seems universal and free from racist implications. But let us resituate Kant's thought in a broader context. Thus, his definition of dignity raises two objections. Firstly, as seen earlier, the law of non-contradiction does not apply to contexts of

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[44] James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 28.

[45] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (ed.) M. Gregor and J. Timmermann, (tr.) M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2011).

radical indignity and racial subjugation. As writes historian Marcus Rediker, racism structures a world where a "man's decision to use his own fingernails to rip open his throat was an entirely rational response to landing on a slave ship."[46] We must entirely rethink what the words ordinary, dignity, and ethics mean. Secondly, Kant's dignity is not the quality of a singular human being, but of an abstract person, which is superimposed on the human. As a consequence, his notion of *person* aims at denying the empirical dimension of the human in terms of dignity. Nevertheless, at the same time, Kant's writings on race, such as his lessons on physical geography, clearly affirm that the Africans' empirical constitution prevents them from attaining to knowing of moral law.[47] Even if they are rational subjects, "Negroes" and other non-white races are theorized as inapt for culture, that is to say, they are unfit for the spiritual work which paves the way for morality. In *The Wretched of The Earth*, Fanon precisely criticizes the abstract notion of human person: "For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity. But this dignity has nothing to do with dignity of the 'human person' [*'personne humaine'*]. The colonized subject has never heard of such an ideal human person. All he has ever seen on his land is that he can be arrested, beaten, and starved with impunity."[48]

To conclude these remarks on the limits of Kantian dignity, let us not forget that Kant was a resolute abolitionist who inscribed in his doctrine the fundamental difference between *price* and *dignity*, concluding that a person could not be bought as a commodity. But Kant's racism was not incompatible with his abolitionism. As Frederick Douglass was going to write in 1856, "Opposing slavery and hating its victims has come to be a very common form of abolitionism."[49] One could even conclude that the German philosopher coined a form of racist liberalism which opposes the *excesses* of racial subjugation *as a*

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[46] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007), 18–19.

[47] Emmanuel Eze, "The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology," in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, (ed.) E. Eze (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

[48] Both existing English translations of *Les Damnés de la Terre* erase Fanon's clear critical reference (quotation marks are Fanon's!) to the Kantian concept of human person. This negligence demonstrates overall ignorance of the philosophical underpinnings of his thought that shaped its reception. Frantz Fanon, *Œuvres* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), 458.

[49] Quoted in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Slaves' Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), XVIII.

matter of principle, while simultaneously tolerating or even encouraging less gruesome forms of racial hierarchies.

Fanon's call for a more material and historicist understanding of dignity is one source for a conceptual recast. It should be based on a proper understanding of the legacy of racial dehumanization in the modern era. Indignity produced by necropolitical means differs from types of social suffering traditionally addressed throughout the history of practical philosophy. Either explicitly or implicitly, the analysis of violence has generally been predicated upon the notion of alienation, that is to say, the fact of becoming a stranger to one's normal, primordial, or natural situation. I believe the inventor of modern social philosophy to be Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who famously opens his *Social Contract* with the following phrase: "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains."[50] In other words, the violence of slavery is not constitutive of what the human is; there is a fundamental freedom, intrinsically bound at birth, as natural law. But Rousseau's optimism relates to the utterly metaphorical way he speaks about the "chains," even if he was contemporary to French chattel slavery and its infamous *Code Noir*. But the notion of alienation does not adequately encapsulate the condition of enslavement since it fails to address what it means to be born as a slave. Throughout the Americas, the law that ruled over the birth of the slaves was *partus sequitur ventrem*, which means "that which is brought forth follows the womb." In this case, to be born equates to being enslaved, subjugated, dehumanized. That is why Christina Sharpe vibrantly compared childbirth to the transportation of slaves: "The birth canal of Black women or women who birth blackness, then, is another kind of domestic Middle Passage…. *The belly of the ship births blackness; the birth canal remains in, and as, the hold*."[51] In such case, racialization does not amount to alienation, since it is connatural to Black birth itself.

The concept of alienation's structural inability to address the legacy of racial dehumanization is one of the reasons for the pervasiveness of the notion of "dignity" in Africana philosophy and Black political thought. Reflecting on the notion of Black consciousness, Steve Biko writes, "The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity."[52] According to thinkers such as Biko, dignity is the most radical concept of political philosophy, since it addresses the

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[50] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 156.
[51] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 74.
[52] Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 29.

livability of life itself. Under the aegis of dignity, those who were structurally excluded from public life and politics signal their entering the political realm under their own terms. But what does it mean to enter the political realm? It amounts to ceasing to be limited to domestic and reproductive activities, to being limited to private life. It is a vital contestation for "all those who were not entitled to participate in public life because they did not belong to 'society' but merely to domestic and reproductive life, because their work belonged to a master."[53] According to Jacques Rancière, to be political equates to being both matter and actor of public deliberation. If we keep focussing on the example of slavery, politicization of the enslaved condition took historically two major forms.

Firstly, abolitionist propagandist strategy often insisted on politicization of Black suffering. It is important to talk about Black suffering, but it is also risky. Gilles Deleuze believed that the experience of violence is what forces us to think, getting the mind forced out of its natural stupor.[54] But the history of chattel slavery teaches us that even if it is true, it is also what causes a violence which radically prevents one from thinking, turning her voice into a scream. The slave's scream expresses rebellion and renders it inaudible at the same time. Structurally, politicization of suffering amounts to "speaking-for" someone else, incurring the risk of confiscating the slave's voice. That is the reason why politicization of suffering remains incomplete without what slave revolts historically carried forth: the politicization of Black power. Black people are not only passive suffering bodies, but also agents of contestation and invention. We go from "speaking-for" to "speaking-with." Both of these two aspects are necessary to let Black politics of dignity emerge.

However, let us not forget that to describe Black dignity, we have had to engage *anamnesis*, to recall and narrate some facts from the long history of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. It is no coincidence. Black collective dignity is both the effort to live a life that is worth living and the history of these efforts. Black dignity is always already inhabited by the dead. Today, when a young Black gets humiliated, raped, or murdered, the whole history of Black struggle is in jeopardy. Our dignity is older than us. Black dignity amounts to receiving a long chain of historical transmission in which suffering is conflated with power. Biko's consciousness inherited from Fanon's, who inherited from Césaire's, who inherited from Du Bois's, who inherited from David Walker's, and so on. Black dignity is consciousness of a

[53] Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso Books, 2014), 56.
[54] Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 119.

consciousness, a *deep historicity* fueled with ancestrality. Said otherwise, our present problems as racialized people intimately relate with the issues our ancestors and predecessors faced, and especially with the creative answers they gave.

Conclusion

As a matter of conclusion, I want to pay tribute to a too often unjustly discredited moment of affirmation of Black dignity—namely, the Négritude movement, and more precisely its actualization in Aimé Césaire. Born in Paris in the 1930s as an intellectual rebellion of young writers from Africa and its diaspora, Négritude is now often said to have been always already overtaken by either Sartre or Fanon. Assimilated with a naïve obsession with identity, it is generally conceptualized as a vanishing mediator or a ladder one throws away after having been climbed. But I suspect such a polite contempt toward Négritude hides an embarrassment with the "question of being Black" itself. People forget that Césaire's Négritude originates in a ruthless diagnosis: chattel slavery and colonialism caused not only overwhelming human losses, but also a cataclysmic mutilation of both Black and white people's collective memory, since Europeans have had to forget a lot in order to see other human beings as less than animals. As a consequence, the affirmation of Négritude, or in other words claiming the dignity of Blackness, amounts to positioning oneself outside of this process of destruction, and to holding on to something extremely precarious.

Césaire defined Négritude as a "way of living history in history: the history of a community whose experience is truly singular, made of deportations, the forced movement of people from one continent to the other, memories of long-gone beliefs, and debris of assassinated cultures."[55] It is a description of Black form-of-death; but it is also a call, in the sense that Césaire glimpses the future of African and diasporic life. Affirming the dignity of remains, fragments, wreckage of both post-slavery and post-colonial areas, he announces a mutual fertilizing of the Black mind. Historian and literary theorist Saidiya Hartman wrote that for the descendants of slaves, "traces of memory function in a manner akin to a phantom limb, in that what is felt is no longer there. It is a sentient recollection of connectedness experienced at the site of rupture, where the very consciousness of

[55] Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme suivi du Discours sur la négritude* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 2004), 82; my translation.

disconnectedness acts as mode of testimony and memory."[56] I would add that it is precisely what defines Africanness in an anti-Black world: it challenges the Western radical opposition between life and death. In Africana cultures and ontologies, death never was the end of the journey; it rather always has been a resourceful place. Death is populated by allies and ancestors.

Black dignity is neither the refusal of death nor an escape from Necropolitics. It is both the power of survival laying in the very depths of death itself, and the power of dead people that we love, affecting life. Black dignity could not be derived from natural law, since the first diaper of a Black baby is already a shroud of form-of-death. It could not be assimilated with moral law, since anti-Black violence has mutilated even reason itself. It cannot claim being constitutive of any positive right, since the modern state does not protect Blacks but rather assassinates them. Black dignity is no status. It only exists by the grace of the rich history of political, artistic, theoretical, and philosophical revolts Blacks led in order to impose their denied humanity, shifting the very meaning of "being human."

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[56] Saidyia Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73–74.